

Keeping Watch On the Water

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It was the 13th day of this business of keeping the water safe. Toward the stern of his vessel, Lt. Will Arritt stood vigilant with a machine gun slung over his shoulders, eyeing New York Harbor.

The white lather the sea makes was licking the sides of the U.S. Coast Guard patrol boat Eatons Neck, and the spray stung Arritt's face. The skyline - the new one, which takes getting used to - emerged through yesterday's fog like a ghost town.

Arritt, 26, is a Coast Guard anti-drug man. He talks proudly about 11 cocaine traffickers he helped pick up in the eastern Pacific last year. This is a different job.

"After seeing it on the news, you have a lot of emotion and anger," he said. "I don't want it to happen again."

So, Arritt is one of the men in Coast Guard boats toting guns in New York waters. But the bigger picture is that he is aboard one of 30 Coast Guard vessels that have sailed to the harbor from all over the Eastern Seaboard after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. They have established a security perimeter from the Verrazzano Bridge and up and down the Hudson and East rivers. No recreational vehicles are allowed within 500 yards of the shoreline, and Coast Guard officials have turned away commercial boats.

The mission, dubbed Operation

Guarding Liberty, is the largest number of Coast Guard boats patrolling New York Harbor, Coast Guard officials say.

The boats range from 200-foot cutters which serve as command centers to light, high-speed Boston Whalers which boast a trio of machine guns manned by reservists.

On the water there are still the pleasure boaters who want to gawk at Ground Zero. Coast Guard officials have had to turn them away and board some vessels.

Gary Smialek, who commands the operation from the cutter Tahoma, said the Coast Guard vessels are serving as a deterrent.

"We're prepared for anything. There could be a vessel that there's a bomb on."

It's Chief Robert Martin's first time up north. He never saw the Twin Towers.

"Only in movies," he said. Last week he saw what was left. "I was numb until I saw it in person."

Some, like Martin, believe President George W. Bush's new emphasis on homeland defense will help change the role of the Coast Guard.

"I see port security coming to the forefront," Martin said.

John Franco, 24, a Brooklyn native,

works as a machinery technician in the bowels of the engine room of the Tahoma.

It's claustrophobic work, 10 feet below

the water line. And Franco's job doesn't find him on the deck much. But the thought of those who perished at the World Trade Center "really pushes you to keep going," he said.